

The Necessity of the Imam

Bismillah hir Rahman nir Rahim

In The Name of God The Most Beneficent The Most

Merciful

The question of rightful leadership following the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him and his family) has been a significant topic of debate within the Islamic tradition. The Sunni majority believes that the Prophet did not appoint a successor, and therefore, leadership was rightfully taken by the Caliphs: Abu Bakr, Umar ibn al-Khattab, Uthman ibn Affan, and finally, Ali ibn Abi Talib. In contrast, the Shi'i perspective asserts that Ali ibn Abi Talib was the first Imam, divinely chosen by the Prophet to lead the ummah. This line of Imam, according to Shi'i belief, continues through his descendants.

Among the Shi' two primary sects emerge: the Ithna-Ashariyyah (Twelvers) and the Isma'iliyyah. The focus here is particularly on the Nizari Isma'ili's, who believe that Imam is continuous and living. Both sects agree on the legitimacy of the first six Imams, up to Ja'far al-Sadiq. However, a split occurs after his death: the Ithna-Ashari maintain that the Imam continued with Musa al-Kazim and ended in occultation with the twelfth Imam, al-Mahdi, who they believe will return at the end of time. The Isma'ilis affirm that the line of Imams never ceases and that a living Imam must always be present to guide humanity.

Having established the historical foundations of the dispute, let us now turn to the Qur'anic, rational, and traditional proofs for the necessity and continuity of the Imam.

The argument will unfold in three stages: first, the proof of Imam in the Qur'an, second, the necessity of Imam in the world, and finally, the Isma'ili understanding of the continuous presence of the Imam.

As it is mentioned in Qur'an:

"And remember that Abraham was tried by his Lord with certain commands, which he fulfilled: He said: 'I will make thee an Imam to the nations.' He pleaded: 'And also (Imams) from my offspring!' He answered: 'But My Promise is not within the reach of evildoers.'"
2:124

This verse is a crucial testimony. Prophet Abraham is subjected to divine tests, and upon successfully fulfilling them, he is granted the rank of Imam. Notably, Allah's declaration *"I will make thee an Imam"* follows only after Abraham's obedience. This message of Allah indicates that Imamatus is not a worldly status achieved by election or lineage alone, but a divine bestowal contingent upon spiritual merit and obedience to divine command.

When Abraham asks for Imams from his progeny, God responds *"My Promise is not within the reach of evildoers."*¹ (?) Therefore, it is clear that Qur'an indicates that the divine covenant of Imamatus is selective; it cannot be granted to the unjust. Thus, future Imams, by this very definition, are not ordinary rulers or scholars, but purified souls, chosen and protected by divine wisdom.

One might argue: Does "Imam" here mean "leader"? The verse itself refutes this. It is not humans but Allah who grants the title after divine testing. An imam is no ordinary leader selected by people, nor is it the role of scholars who differ among themselves. The Imam referred to here is divinely appointed, spiritually pure, and directly connected to God's command.

"O ye who believe! Obey Allah, and obey the Messenger, and those charged with authority among you. If ye differ in anything among yourselves, refer it

***to Allah and His Messenger, if ye do believe in Allah and the Last Day: that is best, and most suitable for final determination.*"²**

In the Qur'an, this verse commands obedience to three distinct authorities: Allah, His Messenger, and those vested with authority among you (*ulul amr minkum*). Now the question is, who are these "*those with authority*"?

Are they rulers? If so, must one obey even unjust and oppressive rulers? Not, for Islam forbids obedience to corruption. Others claim it refers to scholars, but scholars disagree among themselves on essential theological matters. If authority lies in contradiction, then how can it be divine?

To resolve this, we return to the earlier verse regarding Abraham: Imams from his progeny, divinely appointed and spiritually pure. These are the ones whom Allah Himself has granted authority. Thus, the "*ulul amr*" must be none other than the rightful Imams those who continue the light of guidance after the Prophet.

The Qur'an itself tells us that its meanings are both precise (*Zahir*) and allegorical (*Batin*). Who, then, understands both? Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani, a renowned Ismaili da'i,³ explains why the Imam's role of revealing the *ta'wil* is so essential.

"If the meanings that are adduced from the outward sense are all erroneous and what is intended by the phrase is not its meaning, but rather it has the function of metaphor and symbol, wisdom requires there to be in the community someone who

² Qur'an 4:59

³ Hamid al Din al Kirmani, Master of the age(*al-Masabih fi Ithbat al-Imama*): An Islamic Treatise on the Necessity of the Imamate, trans. Paul E. Walker(London: I.B. Tauris in association with the Institute of Islamic Studies, 2007, 73.

explains to them what those metaphors and similes refer to, lest they fall into error and believe what they should not."

Those who doubt the Imam's spiritual authority often claim that the Imam guides by personal opinion or interpretation. But the Qur'an says otherwise.

"And We made them leaders, guiding (men) by Our Command, and We sent them inspiration to do good deeds, to establish regular prayers, and to practise regular charity; and they constantly served Us (and Us only)." ⁴

I want to clarify that the word "leader" in this verse, which in Arabic is "a'immatan," literally means "Imam." Depending on the translation, some use "imams" instead of "leaders," but since this is a translation, most use "leader." This verse also clarifies that the Imams guide not by their initiative, but by divine command. God inspires them to perform righteous acts, and their actions are a result of divine inspiration, not individual reasoning.

A similar theme occurs in Surah 32:23-24:

"We did indeed aforetime give the Book to Moses be not then in doubt of its reaching (thee): and We made it a guide to the Children of Israel...And We appointed, from among them, leaders, giving guidance under Our command, so long as they persevered with patience and continued to have faith in Our Signs."

It is again mentioned in Qur'an that:

⁴ Qur'an, Surah 21.73

The guidance of the leaders is "under Our command." Their authority is not temporal but sacred; it is upheld as long as they uphold divine patience and faith. This is not political power but divine representation. 21:73"

*And We made them Imams, guiding (men) by Our command, and We sent them inspiration to do good deeds, to establish regular prayers, and to practice regular charity; and they constantly served Us (and Us only)."*⁵

Some may say:

"The Qur'an is sufficient for us; we have no need of a divinely appointed guide." They assert that the Qur'an is perfect, without any error and indeed, we agree. The Qur'an is the eternal Word of God, revealed as a guidance for humankind.

Torah, the Injil (Gospel), and the Qur'an across different cycles? The prophets who brought these scriptures were not merely messengers of text; they were its interpreters. And after them, who takes up this role?

My question is: *Does the Qur'an interpret itself?* Does it adapt to the evolving conditions of every age, guiding the believers in each generation? If the Qur'an alone were sufficient without an interpreter, why then did God send not one, but three revelations: the Torah, the Injil (Gospel), and the Qur'an across different cycles? The prophets who brought these scriptures were not merely messengers of text; they were its interpreters. And after them, who takes up this role?

The answer is clear: *just as the Qur'an was revealed for all time, it must be interpreted in every time.* The Prophet was the first interpreter of the Qur'an in his age. After him, the role of ta'wil(esoteric interpretation) must fall upon those designated by divine authority: the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt.

⁵ [?]

If they reply that the Book of God guides the people, we will tell them that the Book cannot speak without a speaker. Suppose they claim that the Book is sufficient without an interpreter. In that case, they belittle the speech of God Who says: 'We have sent down to you a (O Muhammad) the Remembrance (the Qur'an), so that you may explain clearly to people whatever We have sent down for them - perhaps they may reflect upon it' (16:44)..."

I quote here the hadith of the Prophet,

"There is one among you who will fight with you over the interpretation of the Book just as I fought with you over its revelation (tanzil-i an)? Abū Bakr said then, 'O Emissary of God, am I the one who will start this fight?' The Prophet said, 'No.' Then 'Umar said, 'O Emissary of God, am I that one?' He answered, 'No.' 'Uthmān then said, 'Am I the one, O Emissary of God?' 'No', he replied. All of them asked together, 'Then who is this one who will fight over the interpretation of the Book?' The Prophet answered, 'He who is repairing my sandal' They looked and it was 'Ali b. Abi Talib - may God be pleased with him - who was seated in another row, sewing the Prophet's sandals - for their straps were broken - and lacing them up 50 They all knew then that he was the master of hermeneutics of the Book and the Law (khudavand-i ta wil-i kitab ve-shariat)."⁶

In other words, the Qur'an was never given for passive reading or individual interpretation. It was to be recited *according to the needs of the time*, and only one firmly rooted in divine knowledge could unveil its inner meanings.

Some may argue, "But our scholars will help us interpret the Qur'an and address matters related to religion." To do that, we must ask:

⁶ Nasir Khusraw, Between reason and Revelation (Kitab-i Jami al-hikmatayn), trans. Eric Ormsby (London: I.B Tauris in association with The institute of ismaili studies, 2012), 63.- See al-Hakim al-Nisaburi, al-Mustadrak ala al-Sahihay (Beirut, 2002), p. 926, no. 4679, cited in R. Shah-Kazemi, Justice and Remembrance (London, 2006), p.19.

Which scholar? Among the many schools, interpretations, and conflicting opinions, who holds the ultimate authority?

Supporting this point is a quote from *Tathbīt al-Imāma*, a work attributed to the Fatimid Caliph and Imam al-Mansur. In this text, he highlights the confusion that arises when people rely solely on scholars without a divinely appointed guide, underscoring the necessity of a living Imam to preserve unity, clarity, and a proper understanding of the faith.

"Suppose that such matters were sanctioned. Then, when two people disagree on a particular issue, under which provision should they be judged? If they were judged according to one of two provisions, then what would be your position? If someone said that this judgement was pronounced by some wise man's point of view, then one would say to them: Why did you not judge according to the other provision, which was the point of view of another wise man? "

We now turn to a verse that the literalist interpretations seek to veil or dilute, verse 36:12 of the Qur'an:

إِنَّا نَحْنُ نُحْيِي الْمَوْتَىٰ وَنَكْتُبُ مَا قَدَّمُوا وَآثَرَهُمْ وَكُلَّ شَيْءٍ أَحْصَيْنَاهُ فِي إِمَامٍ مُّبِينٍ

"Indeed, We give life to the dead and record what they have sent before and what they left behind; and everything We have enumerated in a clear Imam (imāmin mubīn)."

They read this as: *"in a clear book."* But this is a mistranslation driven by theological discomfort. The Arabic word is "Imam," not "Kitab." The Qur'an does not say *"kitābin mubīn,"* a clear book, but *rather "imāmin mubīn,"* a clear Imam. The verse attributes to the Imam the role of encompassing all divine enumeration; he is the keeper of knowledge, the living guide, and the manifestation of heavenly command.

If all things are counted and contained in an Imam, then he is not a mere scholar or preacher; he is the living axis (*qutb*) around which the world turns in spiritual meaning. This verse alone, read with sincerity and without the veil of sectarian prejudice, ends all

arguments. For one either accepts the divine authority of the *imāmin mubīn*, or one must alter the word of God to fit one's constructs.

To explore this, I will turn to a quote by Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani, in which he explains why there must be an Imam to continue the role and guidance of the Prophet Muhammad. He asserts that questions and judgments arise in every era which would have been directed to the Prophet in his time. Therefore, a continuous Imam is necessary to provide clear guidance and prevent confusion within the community.

“God made it obligatory to refer what one does not know about, or that in which there is a difference of opinion, to the Messenger. He decreed referring to him in His saying: If you⁷ quarrel concerning a matter refer it to God and the Messenger 14: 59]. In regard to what one wa⁸nted to know concerning matters that were the subject of contention and difference in respect to issues of religion during the time of the Prophet, the authority was him, but it was not possible nor feasible for him to remain in the world to be among his community to the end so that they could refer to him that in which there occurred a difference or a issue of religion regarding which they did not have sure knowledge. Accordingly, it was necessary to put in the place of the Messenger someone to whom to refer those issues of religion about which there were differences, so that the decision would be his in that matter and the command of God would be upheld. The person who assumes the place of the Messenger is the imam. Thus, the imamat is essential.”

⁷ Imam al-Mansur, The Shi'i Imamate(Tathbit al-imama), A Fatimid Interpretation, trans. Sami Makarem(London: I.B Tauris in association with The institute of ismaili studies,2013), 64.

⁸ Kirmani, Master of the age, 76.

Kirmani, Master of the age, 74.

Imam Ali ibn Abu Talib, Nahjul Balagha, Sermons, Letters and Sayings of Imam Ali ibn Abu Talib, trans. Sayed Ali Reza(Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an,Inc, 1996), 105.

I then move to another quote from Hamid al Kirmani in the same book, in which he continues to explain why the Imam is necessary, but as a safeguard.

“ God singled out the community that existed at the time of the Prophet by the incredible virtue of his having brought into existence among them the messenger as a safeguard for them against punishment...”God confirmed that in His revelation when He said: 'If they, having sinned against themselves, should come to you and they ask forgiveness of God and the Messenger also asks forgiveness for them, they would find God most forgiving and merciful' [4: 64).... That community had the virtue of having among them the Messenger to decide their judgments, instruct them on the waymarkers of their religion and its obligations, prompt them to seek the afterlife, to exert themselves in the way of God, and to ask God to forgive them their sins. None in existence was the like of him among them, but still, they are not more favoured than any others, since the Messenger is the Messenger to all people and is the means for the [saving of the) whole. Accordingly, given that God is not unjust to His servants, it is necessary that after the Prophet there come to the community someone who takes up his role and replaces him in being its safeguard.”[?]

This is the Qur’anic proof of the necessity of the Imam: that he must exist, interpret, and guide. Not once has the Quran stated to elect a leader or to follow scholars; instead, it instructs us to follow the Imam. Like Imam Ali said in Najhul Balagah, “Beware! By Allāh the son of Abu Quhafah (Abu Bakr) dressed himself with it (the caliphate), and he certainly knew that my position about it was the same as the position of the axis about the hand-mill.”

The Imamatus has constantly been challenged, as stated by Jafar Mansur al-Yaman, a significant early Ismaili dai.

“[The Imam says] that the people of Moses were thus tested through Aaron, but they rebelled against him and obeyed the Sàmiri. And the people of Jesus were tested with Simon, but they rebelled against him and obeyed Pilate. And this community was tested with the Prince of the Believers, but they rebelled against him and obeyed Abū Bakr and Umar.”

Thus, I will return to the question: *Is the Imamatus necessary, and is it divinely instituted?* The answer, both from the Qur’an and reason, is a resolute yes.

I have shown that God made Prophet Abraham an Imam only after he passed divine tests, not elected by people, but appointed by Allah Himself. We demonstrated that Imams are divinely inspired guides who act under *God’s command*, not human whim or scholarly speculation. They are not mere jurists or pious individuals, but those who receive divine instructions to guide the Ummah. To reduce the Imam to a metaphorical title is to ignore the explicit wording of the Qur’an and the history of revelation.

Some may argue that the Qur’an is sufficient. But the Qur’an itself refutes this idea. It testifies that some verses are allegorical, and only those *firmly rooted in knowledge* can grasp their meaning. It reminds us that the Prophet’s task was not just to deliver the Book, but to *explain it* as well. And it declares that *everything* has been recorded “in a Clear Imam (imāmin mubīn)” (36:12), not in a *kitāb mubīn* (clear Book), but an Imam. To ignore this is to close one’s eyes to the light that is in plain sight.

The Prophet was the *speaker* in his time, and after him, the Imams from his progeny through Ali and Fatima became the living *interpreters* of the Qur’an. Just as every age needs a Prophet or a guide, every generation needs a living Imam who can unfold the inner meanings of revelation, respond to new circumstances, and offer divine guidance tailored to the souls of the age.

Supporting this point is a quote from Imam al-Mansur. In this text, Imam al-Mansur emphasizes that the Imam cannot be wrong, for that would imply that God is wrong:

“If it were possible for the imam to miss such truths it would be possible for him not to know t⁹hem. If it were possible not to know them, then religion would be imperfect, but God (Glory be to him) has told us in His Book that religion was perfected. Since it was perfected, and analogy and personal judgement and opinion were proven to be invalid, then the perfection of religion means that the vicegerent of God's Prophet should necessarily know all the sacred commandments of religion revealed to God's creation. Nothing that is liable to happen should, therefore, be beyond the scope of knowledge of the imam. This is the evidence of his imamate.”¹⁰

In the Nizari Ismaili tradition, this truth is not a theory; it is a living reality. The Imam of the Time is not hidden, not in occultation, but present and manifest, continuing the light of guidance from generation to generation, from Mawlana Ali to Mawlana Shah Rahim...

⁹ Ja'far b. Mansur al Yaman, The Book of Unveiling: Early Fatimid Ismaili Doctrine in the Kitāb al-Kashf, trans. Dr Fares Gillon (London: I.B. Tauris in association with The institute of ismailo studies, 2024), 110-11.

¹⁰ Mansur, The Shi'i Imamate, 87.